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LETTER

TO

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A LETTER, &c.

SIR,

I AM much obliged by your attention, in having directed your bookseller to send me an early copy of your ingenious work. It has been my companion during a long journey, and has furnished me with entertainment, similar to that which I have occasionally had the honour to experience, from your animated conversation on the subject. In the general principles and theory of the art, which you have considered with so much attention, I flatter myself that we agree; and that our difference of opinion relates only to the propriety, or, perhaps, possibility, of reducing them to practice.

I am obliged both to Mr. Knight, and to yourself, for mentioning my name as an exception* to the tasteless herd of

* Should the new system of improving, “ by neglect and accident,” ever prevail so far as to render this beautiful king-

Mr. Brown's followers. But while you are pleased to allow me some of the qualities necessary to my profession, you suppose me deficient in others, and therefore strongly recommend the study of "what the higher artists have done, both in their pictures and drawings;" a branch of knowledge which I have always considered to be not less essential to my profession than hydraulics or surveying; and without which I should never have presumed to arrogate to myself, the title of "*Landscape Gardener*," which you observe is, "*a title of no small pretension.*"

It is difficult to define GOOD TASTE in any of the polite arts; and amongst the respective professors of them, I am sorry to observe that it is seldom allowed in a rival; while those who are not professors, but, being free from the business or dissipation of life, dom one huge picturesque forest, I doubt whether such mention of my name may not be attributed to the same delicate motives which you so ingeniously assign in excuse for Mr. Mason's praise of Brown.

have found leisure to excel in any one of these arts, generally find time also to cultivate the others ; and because there really does exist some affinity betwixt them, they are apt to suppose it still greater.*

During the pleasant hours we passed together amidst the romantic scenery of the Wye, I do remember my acknowledging that an enthusiasm for the picturesque, had originally led me to fancy greater affinity betwixt *Painting* and *Gardening*, than I found to exist after more mature consideration, and more practical experience ; because, *in whatever relates to man, propriety and convenience are not less objects of good taste, than picturesque effect* ; and a beautiful garden scene is not more defective because it would not look well on canvas,

* Thus *Music* and *Poetry* are often coupled together, although very few instances occur in which they are made to assimilate ; because the melody of an air is seldom adapted either to the rhyme or measure of the verse. In like manner, *Poetry* and *Painting* are often joined ; but the canvas rarely embodies those figurative personages to advantage, which the poet's enthusiasm presents to the reader's imagination.

than a didactic poem because it neither furnishes a subject for the painter or the musician. There are a thousand scenes in nature to delight the eye, besides those which may be copied as pictures ; and indeed one of the keenest observers of picturesque scenery (Mr. Gilpin), has often regretted that few are capable of being so represented, without considerable license and alteration.

If therefore the painter's landscape be indispensable to the perfection of gardening, it would surely be far better to paint it on canvas at the end of an avenue, as they do in Holland, than to sacrifice the health, cheerfulness, and comfort of a country residence, to the wild but pleasing scenery of a painter's imagination.

There is no exercise so pleasing to the inquisitive mind, as that of deducing theories and systems from favourite opinions : I was therefore peculiarly interested and gratified by your ingenious distinction betwixt the beautiful and the picturesque ; but I cannot

admit the propriety of its application to landscape gardening ; because beauty, and not “ picturesqueness,” is the chief object of modern improvement : for although some nurserymen, or labourers in the kitchen garden, may have badly copied Mr. Brown’s manner, yet the unprejudiced eye will discover innumerable beauties in the works of that great self-taught master : and since you have so judiciously marked the distinction betwixt the *beautiful* and the *picturesque*, they will perhaps discover, that, where the habitation and convenience of man can be improved by *beauty* ; “ *picturesqueness*” may be transferred to the ragged gipsy, with whom “ the wild ass, the Pomeranian dog, and shaggy goat,” are more in harmony, than “ the sleek-coated horse,” or the dappled deer,* which have never till lately been discovered, when “ in groups, to be meagre and spotty.”

* The continual moving and lively agitation observable in herds of deer, is one of the circumstances which painting cannot represent ; but it is not less an object of beauty and cheerfulness in park scenery.

Amidst the severity of your satire on Mr. Brown and his followers, I cannot be ignorant that many pages are directly pointed at my opinions; although with more delicacy than your friend Mr. Knight has shewn, in the attempt to make me an object of ridicule, by mis-quoting my unpublished MSS.

It is the misfortune of every liberal art to find amongst its professors some men of uncouth manners; and since my profession has more frequently been practised by mere day labourers, and persons of no education, it is the more difficult to give it that rank amongst the polite arts, which I conceive it ought to hold. Yet it is now become my duty to support its respectability, since you attack the very existence of that profession, at the head of which, both you and Mr. Knight have the goodness to say that I am deservedly placed.

Your new theory of deducing *landscape gardening* from *painting* is so plausible, that, like many other philosophic theories,

it may captivate and mislead, unless duly examined by the test of experience and practice. I cannot help seeing great affinity betwixt deducing gardening from the painter's studies of wild nature, and deducing government from the uncontrolled opinions of man in a savage state. The neatness, simplicity, and elegance of English gardening, have acquired the approbation of the present century, as the happy medium betwixt the wildness of nature and the stiffness of art; in the same manner as the English constitution is the happy medium betwixt the liberty of savages, and the restraint of despotic government; and so long as we enjoy the benefit of these middle degrees betwixt extremes of each, let experiments of untried theoretical improvement be made in some other country.

So far I have endeavoured to defend Mr. Brown with respect to the general principle of improvement. But it is necessary to enter something farther into the detail of his practice of what has been lu-

dicously called *clumping* and *belting*. No man of taste can hesitate betwixt the natural group of trees, composed of various growths, and that formal patch of firs which too often disfigure a lawn, under the name of a clump: but the most certain method of producing a group of five or six trees, is to plant fifty or sixty within the same fence; and this Mr. Brown frequently advised, with a mixture of firs, to protect and shelter the young trees during their infancy; but, unfortunately, the neglect or bad taste of his employers would occasionally suffer the firs to remain long after they had completed their office as nurses; while others have actually planted *firs only* in such clumps, totally misconceiving Mr. Brown's original intention. Nor is it uncommon to see these black patches surrounded by a painted rail, a quick hedge, or even a stone wall, instead of that temporary fence which is always an object of necessity, and not of choice.

If a large expanse of lawn happens unfortunately to have no single trees or groups

to diversify its surface, it is sometimes necessary to plant them ; and if the size and quantity of these clumps or masses bear proportion to the extent of lawn, or shape of the ground, they are surely less offensive than a multitude of starving single trees, surrounded by heavy cradle fences, which are often dotted over the whole surface of a park. I will grant, that where a few old trees can be preserved of former hedge-rows, the clump is seldom necessary, except in a flat country where the surface of the lawn may be varied by thick masses, whose effect cannot be produced by single trees. The clump therefore is never to be considered as an object of present beauty, but as a more certain expedient for producing future beauties, than young trees, which very seldom grow when exposed singly to the wind and sun.

I shall now proceed to defend my predecessor's *belt*, on the same principle of expedience. Although I perfectly agree, that, in certain situations, it has been executed in a

manner to be tiresome in itself, and highly injurious to the general scenery; yet there are many places in which no method could be more fortunately devised, than a belt or boundary of plantation to encompass the park or lawn. It is often too long, and always too narrow, but from my own experience I am convinced, that notwithstanding the obstinacy and presumption of which Mr. Brown is accused, he had equal difficulties to surmount from the profusion, and the parsimony of his employers, or he would never have consented to those meagre girdles of plantation which are extended for many miles in length, although not above twenty or thirty yards in breadth.

Let me briefly trace the origin, intention, and uses of a belt. The comfort and pleasure of a country residence requires, that some ground, in proportion to the size of the house, should be separated from the adjoining ploughed fields; this inclosure, call it park, or lawn, or pleasure ground, must have the air of being appropriated to the

peculiar use and pleasure of the proprietor. The love of seclusion and safety is not less natural to man than that of liberty, and I conceive it would be almost as painful to live in a house without the power of shutting any door, as in one with all the doors locked: the mind is equally displeased with the excess of liberty, or of restraint, when either is too apparent. From hence proceeds the necessity of inclosing a park, and also of hiding the boundary by which it is inclosed; and a plantation being the most natural means of hiding a park pale, nothing can be more obvious than a drive or walk in such a plantation. If this belt be made of one uniform breadth, with a drive as uniformly serpentineing through the middle of it, I am ready to allow that the way can only be interesting to him who wishes to examine the growth of his young trees; to every one else it must be tedious, and its dullness will increase in proportion to its length. On the contrary, if the plantation

be judiciously made of various breadth, if its outline be adapted to the natural shape of the ground, and if the drive be conducted irregularly through its course, sometimes totally within the dark shade, sometimes skirting so near its edge as to show the different scenes betwixt the trees, and sometimes quitting the wood entirely to enjoy the unconfined view of distant prospects,—it will surely be allowed that such a plantation is the best possible means of connecting and displaying the various pleasing points of view, at a distance from each other, within the limits of the park ;—and the only just objection that can be urged, is—where such points do not occur often enough, and where the length of a drive is substituted for its variety.

This letter, which has been written, at various opportunities, during my journey into Derbyshire, has insensibly grown to a bulk which I little expected when I began it : I shall therefore cause a few copies to be

printed, to serve as a general defence of an art, which, I trust, will not be totally suppressed, although you so earnestly recommend every gentleman to become his own landscape gardener. With equal propriety might every gentleman become his own architect, or even his own physician : in short, there is nothing that a man of abilities may not do for himself, if he will dedicate his whole attention to that subject only. But the life of man is not sufficient to excel in all things ; and as “ a little knowledge is a “ dangerous thing,” so the professors of every art, as well as that of medicine, will often find that the most difficult cases are those, where the patient has begun by *quacking himself.*

The general rules of art are to be acquired by study, but the manner of applying them can only be learned by practice ; yet there are certain good plans which, like certain good medicines, may be proper in almost every case ; it was therefore no

greater impeachment of Mr. Brown's taste to anticipate his belt in a naked country, than it would be to a physician to guess, before he saw the patient, that he would prescribe James's powders in a fever.

In the volume of my works now in the press, I have endeavoured to trace the difference betwixt *painting* and *gardening*, as well as to make a distinction betwixt a *landscape* and a *prospect*; supposing the former to be the proper subject for a painter, while the latter is that in which every body delights; and, in spite of the fastidiousness of connoisseurship, we must allow something to the general voice of mankind. I am led to this remark from observing the effect of picturesque scenery on the visitors of Matlock Bath (where this part of my letter has been written). In the valley a thousand delightful subjects present themselves to the painter, yet the visitors of this place are seldom satisfied till they have climbed the neighbouring hills, to take a

bird's-eye view of the whole spot, which no painting can represent:—the love of prospect seems a natural propensity, an inherent passion of the human mind, if I may use so strong an expression.

This consideration confirms my opinion that *painting* and *gardening* are nearly connected, but not so intimately related as you imagine: they are not sister arts proceeding from the same stock, but rather congenial natures, brought together like man and wife; while therefore you exult in the office of mediator betwixt these two “imaginary” “personages,” you should recollect the danger of interfering in their occasional differences, and especially how you advise them both to wear the same article of dress.

I shall conclude this long letter by an allusion to a work, which it is impossible for you to admire more than I do. Mr. Burke, in his *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful*, observes, that habit will make a man prefer the taste of tobacco to that of sugar; yet the world will never be brought to say that

sugar is not sweet. In like manner both Mr. Knight and you are in the habits of admiring fine pictures, and both live amidst bold and picturesque scenery : this may have rendered you insensible to the beauty of those milder scenes that have charms for common observers. I will not arraign your taste, or call it vitiated, but your palate certainly requires a degree of “ irritation ” rarely to be expected in garden scenery ; and, I trust, the good sense and good taste of this country will never be led to despise the comfort of a gravel walk, the delicious fragrance of a shrubbery, the soul expanding delight of a wide extended prospect,* or a view down a steep hill, because they are all subjects incapable of being painted.

Notwithstanding the occasional asperity of your remarks on my opinions, and the unprovoked sally of Mr. Knight’s wit, I

* An extensive *prospect* is here mentioned as one of the subjects that may be delightful, although not picturesque.—But I have repeatedly given my opinion, that however desirable a prospect may be from a tower or belvidere, it is seldom advisable from the windows of a constant residence.

esteem it a very pleasant circumstance of my life to have been personally known to you both, and to have witnessed your good taste in many situations. I shall beg leave, therefore, to subscribe myself, with much regard and esteem,

SIR,

Your most obedient,
humble servant,

H. REPTON.

Hare-street, near Romford;
July 1, 1794.

P. S. One of the etchings in Mr. Knight's poem has been represented as copied from a work of mine; an idea which I believe Mr. Knight never intended to suggest: the same thing may possibly happen with respect to the place mentioned by you at page 200, and the other "two places on a very large scale (page 215), as laid out by a professed improver of high reputation." Now this being the title under which I frequently

feel myself alluded to from our occasional conversations, I trust to your candour to explain, in a future edition, that these places are not works of mine.

Mr. Repton takes this opportunity to acquaint the Subscribers to his Work on LANDSCAPE GARDENING, that the publication has been delayed on account of the Plates. Several of them, which have been executed in a manner that did not satisfy him, are now re-engraving in a superior style. He flatters himself they will soon be finished, of which the Subscribers shall have timely notice.

